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ABSTRACT

Teaching styles most effective in dealing with educationally disadvantaged students are analyzed. For the purpose of this research disadvantaged students in a secondary school were identified and given a questionnaire to determine the teacher they considered contributed the most and the teacher who contributed least to their education. The teaching styles of the selected teachers were examined for significant attitudes and behaviors. It was found that teachers selected as most effective by the students had attitudes of caring and consideration for students and managed their classrooms in a comparatively relaxed and low-structured way. (JD)

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The Kotter Key

(To Educating Disadvantaged Students)

By Richard R. Benedict

SP 014 344

Saturday evenings past, millions of Americans enjoyed watching ABC's Welcome Back, Kotter. With their playful antics, Kotter's "sweathogs" endeared themselves to the sympathetic Kotter, while they frustrated those of his colleagues who held more inflexible expectations for proper student behavior.

The students portrayed by the actors and actresses of the Kotter stage are enrolled in every high school in America, constituting maybe 10% of the enrollments in rural schools, 15-20% of the enrollments in suburban schools, and 25-75% of the enrollments in our urban high schools.

Educating these students--labeled "educationally disadvantaged" in jargonese--is a challenging, difficult, and essential task. What teacher behaviors are associated with successfully accomplishing this mission? Did the stage behavior of Gabriel Kaplan resemble the behavior of teachers who are actually successful with the real Horshacks, Barbarinos, Epsteins, and Washingtons of this world?

A study utilizing the behavioral categories "Consideration" and "Structure" borrowed from the Ohio State leadership studies of the 1950's suggests that there is a "most" and "least" effective teaching style for those engaged in the task of schooling disadvantaged learners, and that Kotter's behavior may be exemplary of that most effective style.

Method

In a suburban high school on the outskirts of Kalamazoo, Michigan, enrolling about 1,000 students in grades 9 thru 12, 25 of the school's 149 disadvantaged students were randomly selected to participate in this study. Each was asked to name the teacher who contributed the most, and the teacher who contributed the least to his or her education. In addition, the students responded to the statement, "I chose this teacher because, in his or her class: (a) I learned a lot (didn't learn much), or (b) I felt (didn't feel) like I mattered to the teacher." Students could choose either, both, or neither response.

The students identified 23 teachers who contributed either the most (12) or the least (11) to their education. There were no teachers placed in both groups, suggesting these students' shared similar placement criteria, and perceptions of their teachers.

The teachers these students identified were then surveyed. Their agreement or disagreement with two statements--"I have affection for even the most troublesome students" and "I find myself disgusted with those students who are unwilling to take advantage of their educational opportunities"--was taken as an

indication of their Consideration posture.

The degree of detail with which teachers elaborate their curricular expectations of students was taken as one measure of their Structure behavior. Surveyed teachers placed themselves on a curriculum planning continuum that included having written or acquired: (1) a purpose statement for the course, (2) several goals of the instruction, (3) behavioral objectives that lead to student mastery of goals, (4) a listing of discrete learning steps that lead to student mastery of objectives, and (5) a resource guide that links discrete learning steps with appropriate instructional material, as the five points on that continuum. Teachers provided evidence to support their claims made relative to placement on this scale.

The degree to which teachers individulaize instruction was taken as a second indicator to their Structure behavior. Teachers placed themselves on a delivery continuum that included "whole class presentations", "presentations to homogeneous groupings of students", and "individualized presentations" as the first, third, and fifth steps on that five point scale. As with planning, evidence was provided to support claims made relative to placement on this continuum.

Findings

Consideration. Professing to have affection for students is apparently like professing to have affection for spouses, even the most troublesome; few deny affection. In 44 of these 50 cases, teachers claimed affection for even the most troublesome students.

Telling of disgust for those rascals who are apathetic or antagonistic toward teacher efforts to fill their minds with important stuff was apparently an easier admission--32 of 50 admitted disgust. Of these 32 21 were named by students to the "least contributing" group. Of the 18 who claimed lack of disgust, 14 were named to the "most contributing" group.

As it occurred in this study, all teachers who claimed lack of disgust likewise professed possession of affection for even the rapscallions of their classrooms. Carl Rogers uses the term unconditional positive regard to name this caring attitude that is offered without contingency, regardless of the imprefections of those who are the object of the esteem. The data collected in this investigation enables us to conclude, with considerable certainty, that this unconditionally positive posture toward disadvantaged students faciltates their movement toward meaningful educational outcomes.

Structure. The degree to which teachers individualize instruction appears

to have little, if any, influence on the students' decision to place teachers in the most or least contributing groups. For this sample, the correlation between these two variables is very nearly zero.

Perhaps the most controversial, and difficult finding to interpret is the one that shows detailed curriculum planning to be correlated negatively with student placement of teachers in different groups; of 28 detailed planners, 22 were from the least contributing group, while 19 of the 22 general planners came from the most contributing group.

Consideration and Structure in Combination. Does the way a teacher behaves with respect to the Consideration dimension predict the way they will behave with respect to the Structure dimension? The data collected in this study is more supportive of a negative answer to this question. Structure and Consideration can, therefore, be viewed as relatively independent dimensions of teacher behavior that influence the educational outcomes experienced by disadvantaged learners.

Combinations of high Consideration and low Structure behaviors should, then, be particularly facilitative of meaningful educational outcomes for disadvantaged students, while the opposite combination should be associated with less desirable outcomes. The data collected in this study overwhelmingly supports this hypothesis, with all of the high Consideration-low Structure combinations coming from the most contributing group, and 18 of the 21 low Consideration-high Structure combinations coming from the least contributing group!

Student Motives for Teacher Placement. When asked why they placed a teacher in the most or least contributing group, the students responded overwhelmingly that their reasons were they "learned a lot" or "didn't learn much", as the case may be. Feeling they did or did not matter to teachers had little influence on their conscious motives for teacher placement decisions.

What, exactly, they learned in the classes of their "most contributing" teachers, and how the importance of what they learned compares to the educational systems' conception of what was important for them to learn are questions for further investigation. Regardless of what they learned, that they named the acquisition of personally meaningful cognitions as their primary motive for teacher placement suggests that their motives are not frivolous, and should be taken seriously by those educators who believe that that learner outcome is a central intention of the educational process.

Summary

In a nutshell, we witness the phenomenon of students who have a history of

of a curricular disappointment, finding relevance and value in classrooms where the teachers are caring and accepting, and in classrooms where curriculums are more generally than rigorously predetermined. In classrooms where teachers are simultaneously considerate and less structured, success of the disadvantaged student is the rule.

Conversely, we observe these students finding disappointment in the classrooms of those who hold them in low esteem or offer conditional esteem at best, and in classrooms where their performance expectations are more rigorously predetermined. In classrooms where teachers display both less consideration and more structure, the success of the disadvantaged student is the rare exception.

Revisiting Kotter, we can envision a substantive example of the highly considerate teacher who holds his students in esteem despite their imperfections, and chooses lessons for learning from their relevant experiences and immediate needs. That the disadvantaged students in this study acquired personally meaningful cognitions in classrooms where teachers behaved in this highly considerate, less rigorously structured fashion, and didn't value the outcomes of their experiences in classrooms of teachers whose teaching styles are polarly dissimilar, is sufficient reason to consider emulating the facilitative Kotter in our attempts to educate disadvantaged students.

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